

22 July 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The 1971 Presidential Election in South Vietnam

1. The Current State of Play, the Players and the Clock. On 3 October 1971, the South Vietnamese will elect a President of the Republic of South Vietnam, who (under the present constitution) will serve a four-year term. Despite the traditional coyness of putative candidates (none of whom at this writing has formally declared himself as in the race), the presidential campaign has been underway for some time, is now in full swing, and is certain to heat up further. At the moment there are three potential candidates: President Nguyen Van Thieu, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, and former General Duong Van ("Big") Minh. During the past several months, various other political figures have been mentioned as possible candidates, but none currently seems to be a serious contender. Furthermore, both the law and the clock are now diminishing the likelihood of any other dark horses entering the race.

2. Under the provisions of a statute recently enacted (at Thieu's instigation and with considerable pressure from the Presidential Palace behind it), candidates must be on a paired slate naming their Vice Presidential running-mate, and each valid slate must be formally endorsed by 40 (out of 197) members of the National Assembly or by 100 (out of 550) provincial or municipal councilors. These endorsements must be in writing in a prescribed form and validated/countersigned by (as appropriate) the President of the National Assembly's Upper or Lower House, the Province Chief or his equivalent in the case of municipal councilors in autonomous cities. These endorsements are pre-emptive and preclusive, i. e., if any assemblyman or councilor endorses more than one slate, both (or all) of his endorsements are invalid. Thus the filing of a legal candidacy is (designedly) a complex process.

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3. The process is also time-linked to a fast approaching deadline. To be legally in the race, candidates must file their applications, accompanied by a sufficient number of proper and properly certified endorsements, before 4 August -- i. e., within less than two weeks. Given the elaborate endorsement process now required by the "40/100" law -- plus the fact that both Assembly houses are now in recess -- it would be almost physically impossible for a new contender to appear, do his spadework, and line up the legally necessary endorsements before midnight on Tuesday, 3 August. Thus barring some straw man whose entry-skids are heavily greased by the present government, the potential field has already narrowed to the three persons mentioned above: Thieu, Minh and Ky.

4. Thieu's Chances. In the presidential election contest, Thieu holds most of the high cards. He is the incumbent, is keenly aware of the advantages of incumbency, has every intention of exploiting those advantages to the hilt and has shown considerable skill in doing so. Thieu's campaign for re-election has been underway for well over a year and, by Vietnamese standards, is impressively well organized. He has long and carefully cultivated three key constituencies: the military establishment (including its families and dependents), the civil service (ditto), and rural leadership, especially at the village level. On his many trips to the provinces, Thieu's style and organization would have done credit to James Michael Curley in his heyday. Thieu flatters village elders and notables, singling out by name any whom he has ever met before -- and he has met many, chiefly because of the large number of rural notables and leaders who have been to training or orientation sessions at the National Training Center at Vung Tau. Thieu makes a point of attending Vung Tau graduations the way a Bronx Congressman attends bar mitzvahs in his home district. This spadework has been carefully done over several years. It is coupled with an acute consciousness of how to extract maximum local political mileage from the manner, and timing, of issuing land title grants, tangible government aid (e. g., tractors and fertilizer), announcements of financial support for local projects, etc., etc. The net effect of all this activity has been to give Thieu a very solid political base in South Vietnam's rural areas, especially the populous Mekong delta.

5. Thieu has also worked hard to cultivate the military establishment and the civil service, a task facilitated by the fact that -- as all those affected are well aware -- the Presidency is the ultimate fount of preferment and promotion. By being head of a centralized government in wartime,

Thieu also has a reasonably firm grip on the whole machinery of government -- including the Province Chiefs (his appointees) and their municipal equivalents -- a machinery clearly being geared to support his campaign for re-election.

6. Thieu has been weakest in lining up the leaders of what pass for political parties in South Vietnam, partly because he considers them a feckless lot with minimal real clout. He does nonetheless have the tacit support (if not enthusiastic endorsement) of several major political, ethnic and religious groups: labor leader Tran Quoc Buu and his Farmer Worker Party, the Progressive Nationalist Movement (PNM), Senator Don Dai Viets and the VNQDD, some Montagnards, ethnic Cambodians, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and a high proportion of politically organized Catholics.

7. Thieu clearly stimulates little personal ardor and is disliked by many, but he has a generally solid record of accomplishment to run on (particularly in the constituencies he has taken pains to cultivate). His two possible opponents may make more colorful press copy, but both of them suffer personal disabilities in the eyes of the Vietnamese electorate (and neither has an organization remotely comparable to Thieu's). Big Minh provides a handy symbol for protest votes of all sorts, but he is widely (and accurately) regarded as more show than substance, basically lazy and very much the creature of whatever circle of advisors he is currently listening to. Politically conscious Vietnamese, furthermore, are well aware that Minh had his chance to show what he could do in the aftermath of Diem's overthrow in November 1963, when Minh was in total control with virtually the whole nation at least temporarily behind him. He muffed that chance by doing nothing. Ky has flair and panache, which many (though not all) Vietnamese admire, but he is widely regarded as a lightweight, often childish, and temperamentally incapable of sustained endeavor on anything, no matter how important.

8. A sharp deterioration in internal security -- i. e., a rise in the kind of Communist military or terrorist activities that directly affect the well being of Vietnamese voters -- could hurt Thieu's electoral chances since, as President, he is accountable for the management of the war. Adverse economic developments -- e. g., price rises which hit salaried military personnel and civil servants on whose votes Thieu is heavily dependent -- could also prejudice his electoral prospects. At this writing,

however, the military situation seems to be reasonably well under control (despite clear signs of Communist intentions to intensify pressure between now and October). The economic pressures building up in South Vietnam are generally of a longer run nature and (barring some change) are not likely to create any high-impact crises in the next few months.

9. If the history of Indochina over the past two decades demonstrates anything, it shows that no sequence of political developments is ever certain. (By all canons of logic and analysis, the Communists should inevitably have come to power in the South during the 1954-1956 period, Diem should never have been able to defeat the sects in 1955, etc., etc.) Given this cautionary caveat, however, and assuming that nothing goes radically sour in the military/security situation or the economy between now and October, Thieu appears to be unbeatable in his campaign for re-election. In fact, the evidence now available strongly indicates that without any U.S. assistance whatsoever, Thieu should be able to defeat handily any possible rival candidate or field of rival candidates. If the economy and security situations hold, all Thieu has to do to win is avoid major mistakes of a kind that would hand his opponents a gilt-edged emotional issue around which to crystallize and coalesce anti-Thieu sentiment, e.g., publicly executing Tri Quang or throwing Duong Van Minh in jail on some patently trumped-up charge. To lose the election, in short, Thieu would have to blow it with some egregious blunder.

10. Making election predictions is a hazardous occupation for any country, especially Vietnam. Given his advantages and the concomitant disadvantages of his opponents, Thieu would probably win easily no matter how many opponents he had or who they were with (depending on the size of the field) at least 35% of the total vote and an edge of at least 10 percentage points over his nearest rival. In a serious three-way contest against Minh and Ky, Thieu would probably win with something more than 40% of the total vote with Minh taking less than 30% and Ky picking up what was left over. In a contest against Minh alone, Thieu would probably pick up at least 55-60% of the total vote; against Ky alone, he would probably do even better.

11. The U.S. Factor. One thing Thieu, as incumbent, inevitably and unavoidably has going for him is the widespread belief that he has U.S. backing and support. The Vietnamese have an ingrained penchant for personalized theories of politics. By culture and temperament they find

it very difficult to make conceptual distinctions between an office and the man who holds it. In Vietnamese eyes, U.S. support for the Government of Vietnam is, perforce, support for its current President -- i.e., Thieu. Given this style of thought, plus the innate Vietnamese fondness for conspiracy theories, Thieu will be presumed to be the U.S. choice, for whose re-election the U.S. is actively working, almost no matter what the U.S. actually does or does not do -- short of publicly disavowing Thieu and almost openly working against him. Thieu, of course, is well aware of his countrymen's intellectual inclinations. Behind the scenes, both he and (especially) his followers will do everything they can to foster the belief that Thieu is the candidate favored by the U.S. and, hence, the one most likely to obtain the greatest continuing level of U.S. support. Given the tensions and strain of war plus the xenophobia ingrained in the Vietnamese character, this presumption of American favor will generate some back-lash, but on balance it will do much more to help Thieu's electoral prospects than it will to hurt them.

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12. Minh's Chances [REDACTED] If the above analysis is sound, then it logically follows that Big Minh has virtually no chance of beating Thieu, even in an essentially fair contest (i.e., one in which there is no significant voter intimidation or ballot box stuffing even in remote provinces). An independent analysis of Minh's strengths and weaknesses points to a similar conclusion. Minh is quite well known and is a handy protest symbol for whom even devout anti-Communist nationalists who dislike Thieu could easily vote with a clear conscience. His organized support, however, is weak and shows no current signs of improving. His long-time friends in the officer corps (including retired generals with little love for Thieu) have been very hesitant about voicing public support for Minh's candidacy or working, even privately, on his behalf. He is well regarded by the politically oriented Buddhists (who dislike the Catholic Thieu on principle and have never forgiven or forgotten Ky's role in putting down the 1966 struggle movement), but Tri Quang's late May assertion of institutional neutrality on the part of the best disciplined and organized Buddhist faction (the An Quang group) clearly hurt Minh's chances and, for him, came as an unpleasant surprise. Minh is much more likely to garner votes against Thieu (including probably any institutionally-directed Communist votes cast in the election) than positive votes for him, Minh, as the one deemed likely to be the more effective administrator and better President. Minh himself is discouraged and his own low assessment of his prospects seems to be shared at least privately by most of his potential backers. Minh's performance relative to Thieu

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would probably improve in direct ratio to the number of candidates competing (the larger the field, the better Minh would be likely to do), but Minh has almost no chance of beating Thieu -- no matter how large the field.

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16. Actual Prospects. Turning back to the world of current reality, the Vietnamese political scene has changed radically several times in the past and can always change again. There is a chance factor, by definition impossible to predict, but which should never be completely ignored. For example, Thieu or Minh or Ky could suddenly become incapacitated or die of causes natural or non-natural. Assuming no basic change in the overall Indochina climate or the principal players now on the South Vietnamese political scene, however, short term prospects look about as follows:

a. Thieu and his advisors clearly do not want to see Ky in the race and seem determined to freeze him out. Barring a major switch in their current behavior, they are almost certain to succeed. Ky has no chance of garnering 40 endorsements in the National Assembly, hence to qualify as a legal candidate he will have to go the 100 provincial/municipal councilor route. Our intelligence, which we believe to be reliable, indicates that at present he has no more than 30 reasonably firm councilor commitments, none of which have been officially endorsed or certified. Thieu's aides have been busily sequestering endorsements from provincial/municipal councilors and by now may have Ky mathematically blocked. Given the 4 August deadline, Ky's chances of meeting the legal requirements for candidacy are almost literally declining with every passing hour. Thieu and his advisors, in effect, are now running out the clock with Ky stalled way up the field.

b. Thus it now looks like a two-man race with Thieu against Minh. But Minh's position is (characteristically) ambivalent. He would clearly like to run and has been acting very much like a candidate, even to the point of picking a running-mate. But he also is already crying foul and talks increasingly of his unwillingness to participate in a rigged charade. It is quite obvious that Minh would like to be President and thinks he could garner considerable support -- though he may be bearish (or realistic) on his

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chances of actually beating Thieu even in an open contest. It is equally obvious, however, that Minh does not want to "lose face" by entering into a contest with Thieu and losing badly. Also -- less obvious but very important -- Minh, beneath his affable and placid exterior, has a great capacity for bearing grudges and vindictively settling scores. For example, there are excellent grounds for thinking that Minh personally ordered Diem and Nhu executed (without consulting any other leaders of the 1963 coup) and did so because he felt Diem had insulted him by refusing to speak to him on the telephone all during the coup (Diem talked to Don, Khiem, Dinh and Kim but would not speak to Minh) and by tricking him in agreeing to surrender formally at 0700 on the morning of 2 November 1963 but then escaping from Gia Long Palace instead. (Hence, when Minh announced that Diem and Nhu had "committed suicide," in an elliptical Vietnamese way he was stating the truth -- i. e., in tricking Minh and causing him to lose face, Diem and Nhu had signed their death warrants.) Minh does not like Thieu and certainly would not want his actions to enhance Thieu's prestige or claim to legitimacy. Hence, Minh may well feel he can do Thieu the most damage by beating him or, if that looks unlikely, by opting out of the race in a way calculated to becloud Thieu's victory and rob it of meaning.

c. In sum, Thieu can almost certainly win the presidency honestly (and unaided) against almost any opposition. Thieu's desire to "win big" and garner at least a majority of the total vote, however, may have betrayed him. He appears to have succeeded in freezing Ky out of the race, a move he probably undertook partly because he despises Ky but primarily because Thieu felt (and feels) that his chances of being a majority president would be increased if the field was narrowed to two candidates. In his drive for an impressive win, however, Thieu now stands a better than even chance of winding up with a Pyrrhic victory; for in effect he is about to place his image as a legitimate constitutional ruler in Minh's hostile hands.

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